

# Returning Back to the Great Bell: *Dojoji* in Noh Theater

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## “Dojoji setsuwa” and noh *Dojoji*

“Dojoji (Dojoji Temple) setsuwa”<sup>1</sup> has many variations, among which is a story in *Konjaku monogatari* which influenced later books and performances such as noh – *Kanemaki* (Coiling around a temple bell) and later *Dojoji*.<sup>2</sup> A variety of “Dojoji setsuwa’s” common key motifs are: a woman’s unrequited love for an ascetic young “yamabushi” (a mountain monk) who consequently betrays her; her transformation into a female dragon-serpent because of her obstinate attachment and fury toward him; her murder of the “yamabushi”; and as a sequel, the attainment of Buddhahood of the two. The unknown playwright of noh *Dojoji* changed “Dojoji setsuwa” in a sequel to the play. In this play another version of “Dojoji setsuwa” is told by the chief priest of the temple as a horrible incident which occurred there many years before. What is the intent of the playwright in choosing this style?

## The difference between previous “Dojoji setsuwa” and that in noh *Dojoji*

In the noh *Dojoji*, the chief priest relates the old story (the other version of “Dojoji setsuwa”) which has been handed down by the priests of the temple: In the past, in Kii province, there lives a man who is the steward of the manor of Manago. He has an only daughter, and one day he tells her as a joke that one of the “yamabushs” who comes once a year to worship at the shrine of Kumano is to marry her. From that point, the girl believes she will marry him in the future. Years pass, and one night the girl asks the monk, “Do you intend to leave me here forever? Claim me soon as your wife.”<sup>3</sup> The monk is surprised to hear this and immediately flees. The “yamabushi” goes to Dojoji temple for help, and asks its priests if he can take refuge in the temple. They agree and he hides within the temple’s great bell.

In order to find him the girl has to cross the Hidaka River on whose far bank Dojoji Temple is located. To achieve this, she has to shed her human skin, i.e., taking off her clothes, she is transformed into a full-fledged female dragon-serpent, who dives into the River (See Figure 1). At this point her human identity dies and she is reborn as



Figure 1: The picture is from *Dojoji engi emaki*

a female dragon-serpent. This transformation symbolizes the shedding of serpents.

After finding the “yamabushi,” she wraps herself around the bell in seven<sup>4</sup> coils, and breathing smoke and flames, lashes the bell with her tail (See figure 2). At once the bronze grows boiling hot, and the “yamabushi” dies.

It is speculated that the noh *Dojoji* was influenced by a variety of “Dojoji setsuwa,” with the main difference being the heroine’s status. In “The Tale of Dojoji” in *Konjaku monogatari shu* written in the eleventh century, the heroine is a widow; in *Dojoji engi emaki*<sup>5</sup> which was written and drawn in the fifteenth century, the heroine is the wife of an innkeeper. In noh *Dojoji*, according to the chief priest’s description,



Figure 2: From *Dojoji engi emaki*



Figure 3: Wood-printing by Katsushika Hokusai. In English, “shirabyoshi” is “white rhythmic stamping.” “Shirabyoshi” wore the white robe of a court aristocrat, along with his lacquered court cap and sword. They were women with men’s attire.

the heroine is an unmarried girl. At the end of each “Dojoji setsuwa,” there is a sequel in which we see the attainment of Buddhahood of the evil female dragon-serpent. But not in noh *Dojoji*. In the sequel of the story in *Konjaku monogatari* and *Dojoji engi emaki*, the murdered monk becomes a male serpent and marries the female serpent; the reason the woman has chased him is in his previous life he has also been a serpent. The male serpent appears in the Dojoji temple’s priest’s dream, and asks him to help him by chanting the scripture of *Hokekyo* (*The Lotus Sutra*). Thanks to him and other priests, the male serpent and the female serpent can attain Buddhahood. Due to the power of *Hokekyo*, after attaining Buddhahood, she is reborn in “Toriten” heaven (the summit of the mountain “Shumisen”<sup>6</sup>), and he in “Sototsuten” heaven where the “Mirokubosatsu”<sup>7</sup> resides.

*Dojoji engi emaki*’s sequel is written and performed for the commoners around Dojoji temple in Kii province (now in Wakayama prefecture) to convert them to Buddhist beliefs. Even now, in Dojoji temple, using the replica of *Dojoji engi emaki*,

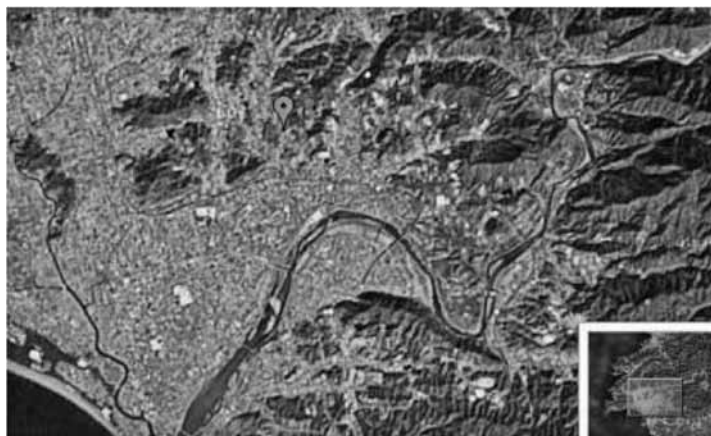


Figure 4: This photo map is the Hidaka River area.  
The arrow shows the place of Dojoji Temple.  
The shape of the river is like a dragon-serpent.  
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the priests practice “etoki seppoh” (story-telling for local people) several times a day. It is believed that through “etoki seppoh,” the temple can increase the number of its “ujiko” (the sect believers in the locality). Through this appendix story, commoners have thought that it is important to become a Buddhist in order to attain “Gokurakujohdo” (Buddhist Paradise). The priests as religious propagandists are keen to show the power of *Hokekyo*.

In noh *Dojoji*, what is noticeable in the chief priest’s story is that he does not talk about the sequel, unlike in *Dojoji engi emaki*. Why? Because its first aim is not to increase the number of its believers. The noh version of *Dojoji* is a play, which is simply designed to entertain its audience. The main scene is the “ranbyoshi” (disordered rhythm) scene in which the “shite” (the protagonist of the play, i.e., the dragon-serpent who disguises as a “shirabyoshi”) dances in a serpent-like style corresponding to each sound of the “kotsuzumi,”<sup>8</sup> which is hit vigorously as if to show the violent pounding of her heart; the scene in which “shite” gets into the great bell is a desperate action; and the shite’s vigorous dance reveals the dragon-serpent’s agony, sadness, and fury (See Figure 5). The main point is not in converting people to Buddhism like in the previous “Dojoji Setsuwa.” This is entertainment for common people, which has successors in performances such as kabuki, bunraku, and others.

Why did the noh version change the heroine to a girl? In changing, the audience’s perspective, its natural inclinations also change. Naturally they sympathize with her



Figure 5: Act One: Photo by Toshiro Morita

fate. She seems to be betrayed by the male characters: her father and the “yamabushi.” It is also connected with “Ryunyo Jobutsu” (the dragon girl’s attainment of Buddhahood), which I will explain later in this paper.

#### Why are women transformed into dragon-serpents?

From around the late Heian Period onwards it was believed that women were impure and inherently evil in nature. This evil within women was often symbolized by evil dragon-serpents. Usually these are hidden and repressed but once jealousy or fury occur, the evil manifests itself in the form of terrifying serpent-dragon spirits which become all-powerful, and consume her completely. Redemption can only be found through *Hokekyo*.

#### Noh *Dojoji* as another sequel of “*Dojoji setsuwa*”

Noh *Dojoji*’s original version is noh *Kanemaki* which is said to be written by Kojiro Nobumitsu Kanze. *Dojoji* is a shortened version of *Kanemaki*, reconstructed with the “ranbyoshi” scene and the “kaneiri” (bell-entering) scene – these are exciting highlights (See Figure 5) which are not included in *Kanemaki*.

In noh *Dojoji*, it is the high season of cherry blossom, early spring. It is a time of rebirth in the natural world. In Dojoji temple, a great temple bell is newly made, and a *Hokekyo* reading ceremony to inaugurate the bell is prepared. There, in spite of

women being forbidden to enter, a “shirabyoshi” (a courtesan woman in male attire) appears in the temple (See Figure 3) . At first, “noriki,” a temple servant, notices her and refuses her entry to the temple, but eventually, dazzled by her charm, allows her to stay and in addition, asks her to sing and dance. She performs for those assembled, but suddenly seizes the opportunity to jump under the bell and disappears within it.

The shape of the bell symbolizes the womb as Erich Neumann<sup>9</sup> and others have claimed. If the bell symbolizes the womb, it produces another entity. In this womb-like bell, the dragon-serpent is supposed to wish to transform herself into an entity which can attain Buddhahood. That is why her first words in the beginning of the play are: “My sin, my guilt, will melt away,/ my sin, my guilt, will melt away. I will go to the service of the bell.”<sup>10</sup> Surprised, noriki reluctantly goes to the chief priest to inform him of this incident. This reminds the priest of a similar incident which happened in the temple many years before. After talking about the incident (previously mentioned) , he speaks to the other priests and begins to understand the nature of what has occurred.

The chief priest: I have felt her jealous ghost around here, and I feared she might bring some harm to our new bell. All our austerities and penances have been for strength in this moment. Pray with all your hearts. Let us try to raise the bell again.<sup>11</sup>

They go to the location of the bell and begin to pray with their rosaries. The “hayashi” (instrumental players) move to the “inori,”<sup>12</sup> playing forcefully as a sign for the exorcism to begin.

The chief priest: Though it is a powerful “akuryo”<sup>13</sup> (an evil dragon, an evil ghost),  
Though the waters of Hidaka River seethe and dry up,  
Though the sands of its shores run out,  
Can the sacred strength of our holy order fail?<sup>14</sup>

In front of the bell, the priests pray clasping the rosaries to receive the help of “the Five Myoos.” “The Five Myoos” are a combination of the powerful five Myoos, which play a central role among Myoos, an honorific entity, which is originally specific to Mikkyo Esoteric Buddhism. The Myoos are bodhisattvas with the appearance of anger, who appear before people or creatures who do not obey Buddha’s preaching

to banish them or save them under the orders of Buddha. In the Muromachi period, their invocation is a prayer used by “yamabushi.” The dragon-serpent has killed the “yamabushi,” so for the “yamabushi,” prayer is seen as an effective protection against the dragon-serpent.

The priest: All raise their voices together;

The chief priest: To the East, the Guardian King, Conqueror of the Three Realms,

The priest: To the South, the Guardian King, Conqueror of the Demons,

The chief priest: To the West, the Guardian King, Conqueror of Evil Serpents and Dragons,

The priest: To the North, the Guardian King, Conqueror of Frightful Monsters,

The chief priest: And you in the Center, Messenger of the Sun, All-Holy

Immovable One,

All: Will you make the bell move? ....

“I dedicate myself to the universal diamond,

May this raging fury be destroyed!”

“He who harkens to My Law shall gain enlightenment,

He who knows My Heart will be a Buddha in this flesh.”

Now that we have prayed

For the serpents’ salvation,

What rancor could it bear us?<sup>15</sup>

What is important to notice is that the priests pray for her salvation. In *Aoi-no-ue* as well, the “yamabushi” prays to “the Five Myoos,” and Lady Rokujo as a grotesque living spirit can gain salvation through the prayer of the “yamabushi.” But in *noh Dojoji*, the prayer to “the Five Myoos” is not successful. The “shirabyoshi” appears as an original dragon-serpent ghost after the bell has risen.

The audience in the Muromachi Period and after who see this play might have been surprised because under the bell, suddenly the dragon-serpent appears. In the previous stories such as *Konjaku monogatari shu*, the female dragon-serpent gains salvation in the sequel. But seeing the appearance of the dragon-serpent in this play, the audience would have understood that the dragon-serpent has not been saved. She is a ghost who still remains in this worldly realm.

On stage, the dragon-serpent’s movement and dance become gradually more fevered, intensely revealing her resentment and agony. The “shite” (protagonist: the



dragon-serpent) wears the mask of “Hannya.” “Hannya” can also be called “Hanja” (half-serpent) : It means that she is in an ambiguous state within herself: the phase of the dragon-serpent with rage toward the “yamabushi” as well as the phase of a girl who wants to gain salvation. The priests then call upon five-colored Dragon Kings from four directions and from the center to soothe the dragon-serpent’s ghost, and evict her from the temple.

Chorus (the priests) : Humbly we ask the help of the Green-Bodied  
The Green Dragon of the East,  
humbly we ask the help of the White-Bodied  
the White Dragon of the West,  
humbly we ask the help of the Yellow-Bodied  
the Green Dragon of the Center,<sup>16</sup>  
all ye countless dragon kings of the three thousand worlds;  
have mercy, hear our prayers!  
If now you show your mercy, your benevolence,  
What refuge can the serpent find?  
And as we pray,  
Defeated by our prayers,  
Behold the serpent fall!<sup>17</sup>

These are the words of exorcism of the evil spirit. Finally, thanks to the Dragons, the dragon-serpent’s ghost is evicted and is forced to go back to the depths of the Hidaka River (See Figure 4). But why do the priests call on the Five Dragons to defeat the dragon-serpent? It was believed that these Dragons were the gods of water, so they were believed capable of putting out the flames from the dragon-serpent ghost’s breath to save the bell.

The first prayer by the priests is to Buddhist Myoos. The dragon-serpent’s ghost is not saved through the priests’ pacification and enlightenment with the power of the spells and religious formulas of Mikkyo Buddhism. The second prayer is to Shinto Dragons. Through the power of the Water God Dragons, the flames she is breathing are extinguished by the power of water. The priests do not defeat her completely, that is, they do not kill her. It is supposed that they give her another chance. In the end, still unable to quell her anger toward the “yamabushi,” even though she wishes them to let her lead to Buddhahood, it is not realized (See Figure 6).





Figure 6: Act Two: Photo by Toshiro Morita

#### Why does the figure of “shirabyoshi” appear?

In the first part of the play, a “shirabyoshi” appears. Why does this happen? She enters the temple on the day of an inaugural ceremony for the temple’s great new bell. How can a woman enter the temple when it is forbidden for them to enter on that special day? There seems to be three reasons. Firstly, she disguises herself as a man. Secondly, from the late Heian period to the early Kamakura period, a “shirabyoshi” is a female dancer who sometimes seduces a man – a dancer as well as a prostitute. If the woman is a “shirabyoshi,” by her charm it is easier to gain admittance from the “noriki,” just a temple servant, into the temple. Thirdly, sometimes “shirabyoshi” are called upon on the day of temple rituals with a troupe of “Sarugaku.”<sup>18</sup> To get into the temple as a man is important for the ghost of the female dragon-serpent, and this seems to be connected with “Ryunyo Jobutsu” (A dragon girl’s attaining Buddhahood) which is written in *Hokekyo*.

#### “Ryunyo Jobutsu”

In Japanized Buddhist dogma, it has long been believed that women have the “five obstacles”<sup>19</sup> because of their impurity<sup>20</sup> and only men can attain salvation.

Dojoji temple belongs to the Tendai sect, and its basic Buddhist scripture is *Hokekyo*. In *Hokekyo*, there is a story in which a dragon girl attains Buddhahood. After the Heian Period, basically in all Buddhist sects women were thought to be unable to attain Buddhahood. But if you read the scripture *Hokekyo*, there is an

exception. It is the story of “Ryūnyo Jobutsu.” In the latter part of “Daidadattahon”<sup>21</sup> in volume five in *Hokekyō*, its story is recounted. The eight-year-old daughter of “Kairyūhō” (the Sea Dragon King) has attained enlightenment watched over by “Monju Bosatsu.”<sup>22</sup> After that, since women cannot attain Buddhahood, the daughter has transformed herself into a man in order to attain Buddhahood.<sup>23</sup>

“Imayoh” are popular songs of the late twelfth century, which are known among all ranks of people from commoners to aristocrats. The retired Emperor Goshirakawa cherished these songs and compiled a collection called *Ryōjinhishō*.

In one of the “imayoh” in *Ryōjinhishō*,

Women have the five obstacles  
and have difficulty getting near the pure land of Muku<sup>24</sup> Paradise,<sup>25</sup>  
but just as the lotus flower blooms in muddy water,  
the Dragon King’s daughter became a Buddha.<sup>26</sup>

As we see in this song, for a long time it is well-known fact that women are considered impure, but they understood that if the dragon girl could attain Buddhahood, why not other women? In its base, there is the idea within *Hokekyō* that no matter how impure or evil you are, the tenets of *Hokekyō* will save you.

On the other hand, in another dogma of Buddhism, there is the idea of “Sandoku,” or “Three Kleshas,” which are three basic evils in the human emotion: Greed (“Ton”), Anger (“Shin”), and Ignorance (“Chi”). Definitely the dragon-serpent has these poisonous elements in her mind. If she is not ignorant, she would have recognized the role of the ascetic monk who goes to Kumano. In Buddhism, “Shin” (Anger) is symbolized by a serpent. As Rima Kodama points out, in *Genryōhakushō*, “Shin” is recognized as fire (See Figure 1 & 2).<sup>27</sup> The playwright of *Dojoji* is supposed to think that as long as the dragon-serpent cannot overcome these earthly emotions, she cannot get salvation.

### Dragons and serpents

Observing the pictures of *Dojoji engi emaki* and others, what the woman appears to be is a hybrid of a dragon and a serpent. That is why I have used the word, “dragon-serpent.” The mythical beast, the dragon, came from China, and in Japan it has become related with the serpent both in form and movement.

## Conclusion

In the pre-story of noh *Dojoji*, the female dragon-serpent has killed the “yamabushi” because of his betrayal to her. But as a ghost she returns to Dojoji after the great bell is rebuilt. On the day of its consecration, a woman in the guise of “shirabyoshi” steals into the temple. After singing and dancing in front of the “noriki,” she enters the bell without permission. The bell symbolizes the womb, and she wishes to be reborn as a woman ghost and attain Buddhahood like Ryunyo has done. She has wrapped herself around the great bell with her body and killed the monk with her hellish heat, but this time on getting into the bell nobody is there.

As I have written, in the scripture *Hokekyo*, “Ryunyo” has become a man, in order to attain Buddhahood. In *Dojoji*, she disguises herself as a man, and like “Ryunyo,” she wishes to gain salvation through the prayer of the priests, but because of her confused state, even though the priests pray, she cannot be saved. If we know the story of *Kanemaki* in which the dragon-serpent can attain salvation, we understand that she has come back to the temple with the hope of attaining Buddhahood as a woman. But in this new version, *Dojoji*, the dragon-serpent’s confused mind disturbs her journey to enlightenment. Her mind is conflicted: She has both forgiveness and rage toward the “yamabushi” even though many years have passed.

This play does not belong to a Buddhist “setsuwa,” whose aim is to lead people to Buddhism, nor other patterned noh plays in which a priest and a ghost encounter, and through the prayer of the priest, the ghost can attain Buddhahood. This play shows the difficulty in the achievement of the dragon-serpent ghost’s salvation. As long as she has the feeling of anger toward the “yamabushi,” there is no chance of achieving salvation – her breathing fire shows she still has anger toward him. Her dilemma is revealed in her dance, especially in the part of “ranbyoshi” in the play, which mesmerizes the audience. This quality seems to be one of the reasons why this play has influenced so many later theatrical styles such as kabuki and bunraku, among others. This play also has a psychological elements which has opened a new world of possibility for future performances.

## Notes

1. “Setsuwa” has several types, two of which are those of folk tales and Buddhist sermons.
2. *Hokkegenki* (*The Record of the Miraculous Efficacies of the Lotus Sutra*) written in the eleventh century also has famous “Dojoji setsuwa.”
3. Karen Brazell, p. 202.
4. In Japanese, “shichinan” (seven misfortunes) means “great number of faults or defects.”

5. "Engi" means "the tale of origins," and "emaki," "scrolls."
6. "Shumisen" is Amida's Pure Land.
7. "Mirokubosatsu" is "Maitreya Bodhisattva."
8. "Kotsuzumi" is a small hand drum.
9. See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*.
10. Karen Brazell, p. 196.
11. Brazell, p. 202.
12. "Inori" means "prayer."
13. "Aku" means "evil," and "ryo" means "dragon" or "ghost."
14. Karen Brazell, p. 203.
15. Brazell, p. 203
16. The Red Dragon of the South and the Black Dragon of the North is not included in this script.
17. Karen Brazell, p. 205.
18. "Sarugaku" is the early form of "noh."
19. Women cannot become Bontenoh (Brahma), Taishakuten (Sakra Devanam Indra), Maoh (Yama), Tenrinjoh (cakravartiraja), or Buddha.
20. In Buddhism, there is no description that women are impure. It is an idea unique to the Japanese interpretation of Buddhism.
21. This chapter was added in *Hokekyo* in the ninth century.
22. "Monju Bosatsu" is a Bodhisattva that controls wisdom.
23. This is called "henjinhanshi" (transformation into a man).
24. "Muku" means "pure."
25. This is where the Dragon girl attained Buddhahood.
26. Gladys E. Nakahara, p. 144.
27. Kodama Rima, pp. 56-57.

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